

# LEARNING COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES WITH TEACHERS IN AMERICAN SAMOA

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## Introduction

A learning community can play an important role in facilitating student learning in a class and this is especially evident for distance learning courses (Alexander, 1999; McCracken, 2002; McSparran & Young, 2002; Walker, 2001). Creating a learning community that is virtual requires the use of online communication tools such as email, threaded discussion boards, and chat rooms. Many online students also benefit through non-instructional activities that promote collaboration and discussion because social interaction can help to form a sense of community and therefore, reduce feelings of isolation often found in distance learning courses (Brown, 2001; Huges, Wickersham, Ryan-Jones & Smith, 2002; Kreijns, Kirschner & Jochems, 2002). The challenge I faced when teaching a hybrid course for teachers in American Samoa last summer was to find the proper blend of online activities, instructional and non-instructional, that would help to build and maintain an online learning community. What follows is a description of my experiences in teaching ETEC 442 Computers in Education as a hybrid course.

## Background

Like the U.S., American Samoa has a rapidly growing need for teachers. In 1997-98, 71% of Samoa's elementary teachers held only AA or AS degrees, about half of the secondary education teachers had undergraduate degrees and an overwhelming number of early education teachers had less than associate degrees. The College of Education at the University of Hawai'i has been involved in American Samoa's teacher education beginning in 1932 with annual institutes and developing into the first contract granted to UH in 1979. Currently, the Territorial Teacher Training Assistance Project (TTTAP), a federally funded program, is responsible for upgrading basic skills and instructional abilities of in-service teachers from American Samoa. The project is the result of a partnership between the American Samoa Department of Education, the College of Education at the University of Hawai'i, and the American Samoa Community College. TTTAP provides in-service or secondary teachers in American Samoa the opportunity of either pursuing a bachelor of elementary education degree or professional development (Inoshita, 2001, p.1).

UH COE faculty typically travel to American Samoa during the summer term to deliver teacher education courses. Most summer courses offered by the COE are four or five weeks in duration with daily class meetings at a

school site. To meet the growing demands to incorporate technology into learning, Samoa has invested heavily in developing an information technology infrastructure. Therefore, it is not surprising that a popular course for TTTAP participants the past few summers has been ETEC 442 Computers in Education, offered by the department of Educational Technology. However, finding qualified instructors to travel each summer to American Samoa has been difficult since the COE already has a fully established campus-based summer program.

## Online Hybrid Course

After declining several times to teach in American Samoa because of work commitments each summer, I was able to respond with a "maybe" to a request to teach from Dr. Peggy Haleck, coordinator for TTTAP. I suggested that a hybrid version of the course be offered where a portion of the course would be taught on site and the remainder taught online. A hybrid online version of ETEC 442 was being developed through the Learning Enhancements through Innovation (LEI) Aloha project and a prototype would be available for use in the summer. The hybrid offering was approved and it was agreed that I would spend the first two weeks of the course teaching in American Samoa and the remaining two weeks in Honolulu, teaching online.

ETEC 442 is a prerequisite course for the Educational Technology master's program and also fulfills the technology requirement for the COE's elementary and secondary teacher education programs. The course provides a broad overview of the use of computers in education and is designed to teach basic software application skills such as word processing, desktop publishing, spreadsheet, database and screen presentation. Course topics include an overview of computers in education, computer systems, troubleshooting, creating a technology plan, software evaluation, desktop publishing, managing information and numbers, technology integration, standards and assessment, hypermedia and Internet in education, electronic portfolios, ethics, equity and copyright. Although the ETEC 442 is taught in either a Windows or Macintosh computer lab, students are able to work on assignments outside of class using their computer of choice.

The conversion of ETEC 442 into a hybrid online course began in Spring 2002 through the LEI Aloha grant project. The course is one of four that comprise the Technology Intensive Enhancement Series (TIES). The alignment of the courses to each other and to the National Educational Technology Standards resulted in some revision in each of

the courses. However, the variance between the hybrid and traditional face-to-face versions of TIES courses was intended to be minimal.

A substantial part of the content for ETEC 442 was produced as CD-ROM multimedia modules consisting of sound, animation, graphics and text. A course textbook also provided content. The online portion of the course is conducted over the Internet using an online learning environment called WebCT. Students participating in this hybrid course need to have access to a computer that has a CD-ROM drive, a web browser such as Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer and an Internet connection. Access is also needed to peripheral hardware such as a printer, and digital camera, and to software such as Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, Powerpoint).

### **LEI Aloha**

*In response to a growing need for technology-proficient teachers in Hawai'i and the Pacific region, the College of Education (COE) at the University of Hawai'i (UH), has been successfully creating a system of courses designated as "Technology Intensive" (TI) to infuse technology into the curriculum. LEI Aloha started as a Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology (PT3) Implementation grant project in the fall of 1999. While these efforts have proven successful at the University of Hawai'i Mānoa campus, the neighbor islands and American-Affiliated Pacific Entities were still in need of continued technology infusion into their teacher preparation programs. LEI Aloha applied for and received a 2001 PT3 Catalyst grant. One of the goals of the Catalyst grant is to expand and improve technology integration in teacher preparation outreach programs of Oahu, the neighbor islands and American-Affiliated Pacific Entities. To accomplish this, a series of four hybrid online courses are being designed to meet the National Educational Technology Standards (NETS) for Teachers developed by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE).*

*The goal of the Technology Intensive Enhancement Series (TIES) of courses will be to produce technology proficient teachers who can model and mentor others in infusing technology into curriculum. The lessons developed for these courses will be used with several target populations. Primarily they will be for pre-service teachers in teacher education outreach programs throughout the state. They will also be available to uncertified teachers currently employed in classrooms both in Hawai'i and American Samoa. These courses will also be an important component for in-service teachers committed to becoming TI mentors for pre-service teachers. Therefore, the series is flexible and well-suited for the range of potential future teachers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as well as for in-service teachers dedicated to becoming technology integration leaders and mentors. The series, hence, supports the complementary relationship between in-service and pre-service efforts to create technology proficient teachers. For more information, contact Catherine Fulford <fulford@hawaii.edu> or Curtis Ho <curtis@hawaii.edu>, project directors; or visit the LEI Aloha website <<http://www.hawaii.edu/etec-connections>>*

### **Course Begins in American Samoa**

The ETEC 442 hybrid course was conducted in late June 2002 at Pava'ia'i Elementary School on the island of Tutuila. There were 23 students enrolled in my first section and 19 enrolled in my second section. The first section consisted of students in Cohort 8 of TTTAP that had started the previous month. The second section consisted of inservice teachers seeking professional development or of those who were accepted in the next TTTAP cohort. Students in both sections were predominately female. All students in both sections were employed full-time while the majority of them (forty) were primarily teachers. Two students held dual teaching and administrative positions. Students ranged in computer skills from beginning to intermediate. Most had some familiarity with web browsing, email and word processing. Very few students had experience in producing a spreadsheet or computer slide presentation. None of the students had ever used WebCT. All students had Internet access at schools in their villages but very few had Internet access at home.

The classes met for 2 hours every afternoon in Pava'ia'i Elementary School's computer lab. Twenty-nine iMac computers were located on tables against the four walls of the lab and were connected to a school network. All computers shared a single laser printer. A data projector was available for class demonstrations. The computers were installed with common application programs such as Appleworks, Microsoft Office X, KidPix2, Claris Homepage and the latest versions of Netscape and Internet Explorer browsers. A computer resource teacher was available to provide technical support and assistance, especially during the online portion of the course.

At the outset, students were told that the course would be conducted primarily online even while I was there. My presence onsite for the first two weeks was to essentially provide an orientation to WebCT and learning online, to teach the use of application software such as word processing, spreadsheet and computer slide presentation, and to provide coaching and technical support. I was also there to observe how well students were able to function in the online learning environment. There were four major assignments for the course: a classroom technology plan, an electronic grade book, an integrated lesson plan, and an electronic portfolio. Online resources and the CD-ROM provided instruction necessary to complete the assignments. Other course activities consisted of textbook and online readings, online quizzes, research and writing, and interaction through electronic mail and web-based discussion. All assignments were submitted to me via email through WebCT.

### **Moving a Community Online**

The initial class meeting consisted of a standard course overview and orientation. Introductions by students were so

warm and lively that I immediately knew that creating a rich social environment was something I did not have to worry about in American Samoa. The community was already there. It didn't need to be built. It did not appear that getting students to interact socially in class would be a problem but, could this interaction be extended online? A number of initial online activities were designed to promote the building of an online community and to allow students to practice online skills needed for the course such as reading and posting messages in the WebCT discussion board, reading and sending email, sending attachments and downloading pictures from the web.

Students were asked to introduce themselves online in a WebCT discussion thread titled "Introducing Yourself." Their introductions online were as warm and friendly as they were face-to-face. I have never been "blessed" so many times in my life as students welcomed me to their community. The introductions were read by all and while most students knew each other, some mentioned that there were new facts about classmates learned from this activity. The next WebCT activity, "True Lies," was also created to build an online community by having students interact with each other through a game. Students were asked to post in WebCT two truthful statements and one lie about themselves. Students then responded to all of the postings by guessing which of the three statements was a lie. This activity, as well as all online activities for the class, could have been conducted in a standard "anytime, anyplace" asynchronous mode. However, since the entire class was logged in to the course at the same time in the same room, the spontaneity of a synchronous activity prevailed. Students were laughing and joking with each other across the room as they read and responded to the truths and lies. The activity appeared to function as intended to. Students were asked to reflect online about their "True Lies" experience and a few reflections are shared below:

*I think the icebreaker activity was a cool one because instead of having a face-to-face introduction we were getting to know each other on the computer through sending little comments and messages to each other. Trying to find out what is a lie and a truth was fun and replying to the person was just as much fun. I think the rationale for this activity was to have fun and to get the feel of the computer hardware.*

*This was a great learning experience!! I had a lot of fun doing this activity and there wasn't really anything that I disliked about it!! I think the purpose of this activity was not only to serve as an icebreaker but to also give each and every one of us a chance to get better acquainted with one another. Now I can't wait to come to this class because I look forward to what we'll be doing next!*

*Well Dr. Curtis Ho I thought the ice-breaker was fun, and that it helped me to get to know my colleagues a bit better, even though some of them told outrageous lies, and some people didn't exactly respond to the ice-breaker as they should have, all in all, I thought it was fun.*

Another strategy often used for building an online community in WebCT is the student creation of simple homepages that include a digital photograph and basic personal information. Since most students already knew each other, this activity was more beneficial to myself as I tried to assimilate into their social community. Because we were on an accelerated summer schedule and I had only one digital camera, I decided to photograph all of the students myself. Handing them their digital images was going to be a challenge because the computers did not come equipped with external disk drives. A solution would be to email each person's picture but this was the first day of class and how would I match picture to name? A better idea came to me. I decided to use Hotmail to temporarily publish students' pictures on the Web. I created a page for each class section. Students were instructed to use a web browser to view their section's web page and to locate their own picture. They then downloaded their images to their computer and were then able to include it in their homepage. They were also asked to email their picture to me as an attachment. I now could put faces and names together and could thus draw myself in to their community. An astute student commented:

*...I liked this activity a lot. Thank you for taking our pictures. I never had a digital one before. Best of all, you made us work for it. I learned to download a picture from the web, upload it to WebCT for my homepage, and sent it to you through email. Hard work but it was worth it.*

### Putting the Learning into Online Learning Community

Activities that prepared students for using WebCT communication tools such as email, discussion board and chat seemed to work well. So far, students were comfortable with communicating socially online. It was interesting that students sometimes talked to each other in Samoan while simultaneously emailing each other in English. I wasn't sure whether students felt more effective using two languages, Samoan and English, or felt a need to reinforce one technology with another, email and speech. My impression, though, is that as they tried to assimilate into the online community, students were still trying to stay connected to their Samoan community that relies heavily on oral communication. Nevertheless, I was still confident that students would balance both social communities well enough to function in an online learning community.

The first major assignment was a collaborative project to create a technology plan for a classroom and publish it with text and graphics using a word processing program. Unlike most classes I have taught, forming project teams was completed in no time. Many came from same schools or villages so natural teams already existed. Others just as easily grouped into teams of three. As teams worked to complete their projects, I encouraged them to ask for help online. Most found it easier to yell for help. The strategy worked. Students were eager to help each other, especially when I was busy with someone else. Most students also found it easier to collaborate face-to-face since it was convenient. Teams that had access to the Internet outside of class found that they could accomplish more by collaborating online. Those that didn't have Internet access often stayed after class to work on their project and met on the weekend at their school to complete their work. A reflection by a student about the assignment is shared below:

*Creating a technology plan as a group demanded collaboration as we discussed what we wanted for our fourth grade social studies class. We agreed on the different items to be included in our plan and assign each member specific tasks to work on. The whole exercise gave us a chance to experience for ourselves how our students could work together using technology. We could not put all the different parts of our plan in one document due to some problems in the system, but we were able to accomplish the task as each member did her/his assignment and submit them separately as we confer with each other what needed to be done.*

### Going Completely Online

My two weeks in American Samoa went by too quickly. Over the course of my onsite visit there, I tried to "wean" students from communicating with me face-to-face but it was difficult to do. The network was slow and the time was limited. Communicating online was not efficient and in fact not needed since the class met at "one time, one place." I encouraged them to solve problems on their own before asking for help. But, I knew that the learning community, already strong because of the emphasis on community in the Samoan culture, would be as supportive as it could. Their enthusiasm and appreciation for what I had taught them made me feel included in their community. However, I returned to Honolulu feeling a little unsure about how well students would be able to function completely online.

Actually, I soon realized after arriving home that students didn't need to function completely online. They still met at the same time, in the same lab. A computer resource teacher was there to provide instructional and technical support. I realized that the biggest change was not in how students were to learn but in how I was to teach. It was I that was

completely online. I made it a point to be online in WebCT during "class time." The time difference was only one hour so it was convenient for me to be available when students needed me. Initial email exchanges were frequent and detailed but as the days went by, students were able to solve some of their own problems. Access to the Internet outside of class was limited so students spent long hours after class and on weekends at their schools to complete their assignments. Comments submitted in their course evaluation are shared below:

*The major strength of the course was the collaboration and the assistance that we received from one another in trying to figure out how to utilize the various programs and to complete the PowerPoint project. I think that was a very important factor that contributed to the success of the entire class in getting the project completed.*

*...I really did gain great knowledge from this class. I know I will never forget what I have learned. Your right about us working on our own, it's a great opportunity to struggle knowing that I can do it. It was a great chance for our class to be able to share our knowledge with each other. And I surely did learn much about working on my own.*

*...At first I was afraid that my computer skills weren't good enough to take this course. Everyone made it such a great learning experience and the instructor was so helpful that I've learned so much and was able to polish up old skills I had but never used it!*

### Conclusion

One of my goals in American Samoa was to build an online learning community to support student learning in a hybrid course. I wanted to make sure that a community of learners was established firmly enough to sustain the adjustments in migrating to a totally online course with my return to Hawai'i. In a way, my goal was not fulfilled, though through no fault of the students. They didn't need an online community like I thought they would. Their traditional Samoan community worked just fine in supporting learning. The adjustments were to be made on my end. I needed to become part of their community more than they did mine. This is different than a typical online class where students come from more diverse communities so adjustments are more evenly dispersed among members.

The uniqueness of the Samoan culture allowed me to take a look at our expectations as online instructors of how a learning community should be. If there is an existing home community nearby, why not use it? The home community provides a safe and nurturing environment that is culturally relevant to the learner. An online community should then be flexible enough to bridge the gap between learners and instructor.

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I have learned that the Samoan's close-knit community places an emphasis on helping everyone in the group to succeed. My presence onsite allowed me to tap into this community in a way that would not have been possible online. The personal relationships I was able to establish in American Samoa made it possible to interact online with the familiarity and trust needed in a strong learning community. One of the best experiences I've had in ending a course came across the Pacific through technology. Students presented their final projects, digital portfolios, using a videoconferencing system. Because I had been there three weeks prior, the distance did not seem so great. Students in typical Samoan tradition said farewell through song and dance. Those in the Honolulu site were invited to dance along with them. Although connected through electrons, we did feel included in the community over 2,600 miles away.

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